

Statement of Joel Holtrop
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Before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Concerning
2002 Wildland Fire Season Preparedness
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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am Joel Holtrop, Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry with the Forest Service. With me is Tim Hartzell, Director of the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination at the Department of the Interior; Jerry Williams, Director of Fire and Aviation Management, Forest Service; and William Maxon, a Fish and Wildlife Service employee and Executive Director of the Southwest Strategy. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management and in implementing the National Fire Plan, it is appropriate to use one statement to review the outlook for the 2002 wildland fire season and describe our Departments' state of readiness and preparedness for the fire season.

At the outset, Mr. Chairman, we want to thank you for your support of the fire management program and, most importantly, for your support of the brave young men

and women who make up our firefighting corps. Our firefighters do an impressive job under adverse conditions and they deserve our thanks and admiration.

Today we will talk about the potentially severe fire season now underway, and how the five Federal land-managing agencies and our partners are making preparations. While we prepare to fight fire this season as best we can, fighting wildland fires is only one aspect of the work we must do to protect communities and restore ecosystems.

The Fire Situation and Outlook

The outlook is for a severe fire season this year. As you know, we are already experiencing a number of wildland fires across the nation. Since 1999, La Niña, a phenomenon characterized by the abnormally cold temperatures in the tropical Pacific, has plagued much of the country with drier than usual weather. The resulting drought condition in the Southwest, Rockies and East Coast has set the stage for a potentially active fire season in those areas. Since October, areas receiving below normal amounts include Southern California, the Southern Great Basin, Southwest, Rocky Mountains and the Eastern Seaboard. The Northeast experienced the second driest September-to-February period in the last 107 years.

Analyzing fuel and weather conditions across the country, the areas of greatest fire potential today include the Southwest, Colorado, Southern California, and the Southern

Great Basin. Also, fire potential is high in Northern Florida, Northwest Minnesota and the Southeast Alaskan Panhandle.

The weather outlook for later this summer and fall calls for generally warmer than normal temperatures in the West and Southeast. Rainfall is predicted to be near normal, except for above normal early rains in the Pacific Northwest along with late summer/early fall dryness throughout the West. As a result, fire potential in the Rockies and Eastern Seaboard states is expected to increase this summer and fall. For the overall 2002 fire season, the greatest potential for fires is in Southern California, the Southwest, Great Basin, Rockies and the Eastern Seaboard from Florida to Maine.

Wildland Fire Preparedness

Each year the five land-managing agencies of the Departments prepare to prevent, detect, and take prompt, effective initial attack suppression action on wildland fires. In order to do this, we need trained and equipped firefighters and firefighting equipment. We maintain qualified firefighters through training and apprenticeship programs, and we have aggressive recruitment and retention programs. We maintain a number of facilities for firefighter housing and equipment storage.

Firefighter safety is our highest priority. Firefighting is a high risk, high consequence activity, and the Forest Service and Interior have always had strong firefighter safety and training programs. This year, however, following the ThirtyMile Fire tragedy in July 2001, where four firefighters lost their lives, we have redoubled our efforts. As the Committee requested, the Forest Service has provided regular briefings on our efforts to improve firefighter safety and training. The ThirtyMile tragedy prompted an examination of the programs to identify areas needing improvement. The areas identified include managing firefighter fatigue, reinforcing use of the 10 Standard Fire Orders and the 18 Watch Out situations, and developing training to avoid entrapment by fire. All of these improvements in training and safety are in place for this fire season. We are committed to doing everything we can to improve firefighter safety.

We also purchase and maintain firefighter personal protection gear and engines, other vehicles, and contract for helicopters and airtankers. Preparedness also includes assisting other Federal agencies, Tribes and States with fire training programs, planning assistance, shared equipment use contracts, and support for interagency fire coordination centers.

In 2001, we made a great start toward increasing our preparedness resources, thanks to the National Fire Plan funding. The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior treated 2.25 million acres to reduce fuel loads and protect priority communities at risk. We will continue this success in FY 2002 and collectively plan to treat 2.4 million acres.

Together, we hired an additional 5,474 fire employees, for a total Federal wildland fire workforce of 17,633. We purchased 406 additional engines, 56 additional dozers, contracted for 31 additional helicopters, and purchased or contracted for many other pieces of equipment and aircraft. Prior to the National Fire Plan, Interior sponsored 14 interagency hotshot crews (IHC) and the Forest Service sponsored 52. With the increase in readiness capability made possible by the National Fire Plan, DOI added eight additional crews. The Forest Service added 13 crews.

In addition to our Federal firefighting crews, we call upon many other firefighting forces for assistance. Our working relationship with our State and local partners has never been stronger. Often, State and local firefighters are the first to respond to fire incidents. In severe fire seasons, State, Tribal, military, National Guard, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and local firefighters are instrumental in fighting wildland fire. We rely heavily on these crews for support, especially the rural and volunteer fire department crews, which are the first line of initial attack in up to 90% of all wildland fires. With National Fire Plan funds, we were able to improve rural and volunteer fire departments' (RFDs) initial attack abilities with personal protective gear, equipment, and training. In many instances last year, these RFDs purchased equipment with our grant money, and immediately responded to wildland fires on Federal land, utilizing the new equipment or protective gear. The DOI assisted 1,445 RFDs last year by providing almost 10 million dollars in grants.

The Forest Service provided over \$138,000,000 to states, volunteer fire departments, and local communities to assist firefighting activities in 2001. With these grants our State and local government partners purchased fire equipment for local fire departments, developed hazard mitigation plans, treated 76,236 acres of hazardous fuels on private lands, accomplished community fire planning, developed market utilization of small diameter material removed through thinning activities, and conducted fire prevention and fire education training.

Another important point to note is that the five land managing agencies have updated the majority of their fire management plans (FMPs) to be consistent with Federal wildland fire policy, with a goal to have all plans updated in 2004, if not sooner. The Department of the Interior has completed FMPs covering 92% of its land. The FMPs are important because they provide the guidance for fire management officers, line management officers and incident commanders to plan for future fire management decisions, and to make quick decisions when a fire incident occurs, as to the appropriate techniques and tactics for effective wildland fire suppression. Last year, 3.6 million acres of land nationwide burned, compared to 8.4 million acres in 2000. Fewer acres burned last year, even with heavy fuel loads and severe drought in many parts of the country. Although we cannot take all the credit - weather was a significant factor – with the help derived from additional resources and personnel, we were able to keep more than 95% of the fires under 100 acres.

2002 Fire Season Readiness

With the forecast for a severe wildland fire season, each agency began early and continues to bring national fire readiness capacity to its highest level. To date, DOI has 4,845 firefighters and fire support personnel. The Department of Agriculture has approximately 9,000 firefighters as we are still identifying these resources. Our combined goal is to have in place a Federal wildland fire workforce of over 17,800 personnel and 1790 engines by mid June. This is an increase of 6,326 personnel and 377 engines from FY 2000. When we realized the severity of the wildland fire outlook, we began to hire seasonal firefighters early and we are working to place firefighting crews and equipment in locations where they can be mobilized quickly and effectively.

When local areas anticipate or experience above normal fire activity, the Departments have the authority, through what is known as “severity funding”, to provide suppression funds to those units so that they can bring in additional staff and equipment to improve initial and extended attack response capabilities and increase prevention activities.

Already this year, the Forest Service has approved over \$11 million for severity assistance; Interior has approved nearly \$3.5 million in severity assistance. Federal wildland fire agencies have enhanced initial attack capabilities in Arizona and New Mexico by pre-positioning resources ranging from airtankers, to hand crews, to engines in strategic locations.

Weather, fuels, and drought conditions all contribute to the number and size of wildfires. We will never be able to put out every fire every time, but we can reduce the number and the risk of wildfire over time.

Reducing Fuel Loads

Fighting wildland fire is only one part of addressing the long-term buildup of hazardous fuels in our forests and grasslands. Reducing the risks and consequences of severe wildland fires is a high priority for the Administration and Congress. Bipartisan Congressional support has provided the Forest Service and Interior with the necessary funding to increase the amount of acreage treated to reduce risks to communities and ecosystems. The importance of reducing fuel loads has been recognized for some time as an important issue. For example, studies performed in 1994 and 1996 recognized the issue. In 1996, a joint Forest Service and Department of the Interior wildland firefighter safety awareness study found that nearly 83% of all wildland firefighters identified fuels reduction as the single, most important factor for improving their margin of safety on wildland fires. As we stated earlier, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior treated 2.25 million acres to reduce fuel loads and protect priority communities at risk. For the Department of the Interior, this is more than doubling prior accomplishments. We will continue this success in FY 2002 and collectively plan to treat 2.4 million acres. Continued bipartisan Congressional support for working with communities and interest

groups are vital to firefighter and public safety, reduction of risks to communities, and to the implementation of ecosystem health goals of the National Fire Plan.

This year, the Departments are beginning the development of a common interagency fire budget planning process that will better refine wildland fire management readiness resources. The process will provide all agencies with a uniform, performance-based system for identifying the preparedness resources necessary to deliver a cost effective fire management program. This system will be deployed by the 2004 fire season and will influence readiness decisions for the 2005 fire season. Some interim components may be online even earlier.

Summary

As stated earlier, the outlook is for a potentially severe fire season this year. The five federal land-managing agencies and our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared for the upcoming fire season. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure the safety of firefighters, communities, and resources. We appreciate continued bipartisan support from the Congress. We will continue to cooperate and communicate among Federal agencies, States, local governments, Tribes and interested groups and citizens to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and resources in our care.

This concludes our statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be happy to answer any questions you and the members of the committee may have.